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Courage or just plain sensible? Some courageous ideas to prevent today's wicked problems for our children as yet unborn

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At moments of immense change, we see with new clarity the systems — political, economic, social and ecological — in which we are immersed as they change around us. We see what's strong, what's weak, what's corrupt, what matters and what doesn't. ... In the uncertainty ahead, one of the most dangerous things would be to lapse into believing that everything was fine before disaster struck, and that all we need to do is return to things as they were. Ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality. It is not too soon to start looking for chances to help decide what will emerge from this emergency. Rebecca Solnic, 2020

Although Covid 19 is likely the biggest global crisis since WWII, it is still dwarfed in the long term by climate change. Yet the two problems have suggestive similarities. Both will require unusual levels of global cooperation. Both demand changes in behaviour today in the name of reducing suffering tomorrow. Both were long predicted with great

> *certainty by scientists, and have been neglected by governments (not Australia in the case of Covid), unable to see beyond the next fiscal quarter's growth statistics. Accordingly, both will require governments to take drastic action and banish the logic of the market place from certain realms of human activity while simultaneously embracing public investment.* Peter Baker, 2020

As we move from the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic into a 'post-Covid' world, it gives us an incredible opportunity to move to a more equitable and sustainable world, one that is courageous in making decisions to address climate change. A world that is healthier for our children and for those 'not yet born' (Teddy Roosevelt's quote on launching the US Wilderness Area legislation in 1912). If we consider the response of our conservative government in Australia, albeit in collaboration with states and territories with a mixture of Labor and Coalition governments, it was remarkably different from the situation pre-Covid. Suddenly, science and epidemiological expertise were not only listened to and valued, but scientific advice was implemented rapidly and effectively. Due to the resulting restrictions, many businesses closed down, with associated job losses, particularly among young people in casual employment, and women. The response from the federal and state and territory governments was to fund workers so that these businesses would survive, sparking debates about a 'universal basic income', making childcare free so that childcare agencies would survive and provide essential childcare for workers, and particularly for women. Similarly, private hospitals and healthcare were brought back in to the public sphere, ensuring that it

really was 'universal health care' equitably available to all. Things considered impossible before Covid suddenly became possible, such as housing the homeless, with people in those areas of care wondering why things need to change back to what they were. Maybe we could now move in to a more equitable and sustainable agenda? Maybe we can shift from the power of the corporate lobbying dollar to the power of science and the power of the people?

Before Covid: An inequitable and unsustainable Australia

In simplistic terms, over the last 30 years there have been devastating effects on our planet from the policies and practices driven by creating wealth without any consideration of how that wealth is created and used by countries; its costs and its damages. Using Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a singular measure of a successful society has driven many developed, and increasingly low-income countries, to pursue a damaging, neoliberal capitalist and conservative agenda. The post-World War II capitalism model with a social democratic influence (much like the Scandinavian countries today) was swept aside in the 1980s by a Margaret Thatcher–Ronald Reagan alliance, influenced by leading economist, Milton Friedman, to create wealth (individual greed), with the promise that the wealth created by the few would 'trickle down' to benefit everyone.[1] As Solnic writes, many are still waiting for the trickle. 'A rising tide raises all boats' was the 1980s Friedman-led economists' cry, fanned by the 'MBA from Harvard Business School' mantras; but many boats were stuck in the mud and remain so.[2,3,4]

Such agendas push unfettered growth and increased consumption, encourage corporate and individual wealth

creation, and corruption and crime, with the promise that everyone benefits clearly not able to be delivered. The combination of increased population numbers with increasing consumption (of many products that are not necessary for health or happiness and often detrimental to it) has resulted in a range of outcomes. They include climate change, environmental degradation (huge waste production/contamination), and loss of essential biodiversity, military activity (arms companies making billions) with resulting increases in refugees, growing inequalities (in wealth, power, opportunity, health, education, employment and housing within and between countries), rising rates of anxiety and depression and mental health problems, costs of services (public welfare services and even prisons have been privatised), and lack of community trust and feelings of powerlessness (replacing altruism and caring communities). Peter Baker (quoted above) could have pointed out another reason for comparing climate change and COVID-19 — both are a result of the way we live on the planet: reduced biodiversity, with animals and humans living too closely; huge increases in global travel to enhance the spread of contagion; and the poor living conditions of many in low-income countries and in subpopulations of developed nations as well. As Paul Mason wrote: 'We do not know what globalisation without 1 billion living in slums, without deforestation, live animal markets and widespread diseases in the 3rd world is like — those are fundamental features of existing capitalism.' He goes on to say: "We do not know what an industrial capitalism without carbon will look like because all our institutions, practices and cultures are based around fossil fuel extraction.'[5]

We are particularly focused on the health and wellbeing of children and young people, not just those already born but those who are not yet born, who will bear the brunt of what these pre-Covid historical policies have created. We are concerned that the most powerful voices in decision making are not those who care for the future of our children, but who stand to gain from short-term wealth. Many of these are global corporations, the fossil fuel industry, the corporate media moguls and wealthy individuals who seem to have huge political influence, compared with the weak (even ignored) voices of those who care for children, families and communities.[6] Science, data and evidence were considered an annoyance and were not considered, in spite of, as is the case with climate change, being overwhelmingly clear as to what needs to be done. The neoliberal agenda successfully constructed a narrative portraying the public sector as weak and a drain on society.[7] This infiltrated our social architecture, damaging our society, and services such as health, childcare, disability and vocational education were increasingly outsourced to for-profit organisations.[8]

Many huge global companies seem to be above government; many do not pay taxes; some have budgets bigger than some small nations. In Australia, our richest 1% own more wealth than the bottom 70% of Australians combined.[9] It was clear that economic growth and vested interests came before our children's health and wellbeing. For example, in the midst of our obesity crisis, junk food advertising to children has thrived and our leaders have refused to consider a sugar tax.[10] Despite two decades of research illustrating the role of diet in the obesity pandemic and the fact that is was estimated to cost Australia $11.8 billion each year[11], our leaders have ignored the

science. In the case of climate action, people were protesting, especially our children, who were watching their future natural world being sacrificed for short-term financial gains. Our world's leading climate scientists made dire predictions about what lay ahead if we continued down our path of destruction, particularly for our children and young people. Yet our leaders continued to ignore the science, pushing ahead with the Adani coal mine and subsidising the fossil fuel industry to the tune of an estimated $29 billion per year or on a per capita basis, $1,198 per person.[12]

What are the characteristics of a society that enables healthy child development? In a civil society the child in their family is surrounded by a close circle (e.g. community, schools) within a wider circle of environmental influences (workplace, social economic, political, cultural).[13] This outer circle is not able to be controlled by those close to the child but can either enable or disable how well the child develops. If controlled by those in a civil society (e.g. where the focus is on equality and diversity, trust and care, the collective good, valuing of parents and childhood, prevention promoted more than cure, environments are protected and there are safe places for all, effective use of helpful technologies, and children's needs are considered as well as adults), this will benefit children of all ages. If, however, those from an uncivil society dominate (e.g. accepting of inequalities, the presence of fear and violence, priority for material wealth, where parents are not valued and childhoods are fast tracked, cures are promoted over prevention, environmental degradation is prevalent and and safe places are for the few, excessive use of damaging technologies, adults' needs considered more than children) , then it has a devastating effect

on the health and wellbeing of the whole of society. We suggest that before Covid, Australia was dominated more by the latter than the former, resulting in some of the poor outcomes which we observe.

How were our children faring before Covid? In terms of comparative wellbeing indicators globally, Australia fell in the middle of the league table — 21st out of 41 European and OECD countries: 20% started school developmentally vulnerable; 25% were overweight or obese; 14% had mental health difficulties in the last 12 months; 17% lived in poverty (OECD definition); 50% viewed climate change as the biggest problem facing Australia; 12% directly experienced family violence.[14,15] Interestingly, the sharpest rise in children living in poverty occurred during the so-called 'economic boom' (from 2003 to 2008)![16]

Not surprisingly, trust in our political and public institutions was falling, with almost 75% of Australians suspicious 'that people in government only look after themselves' and over half viewed government as 'run for the big interests'.[17]

Australia has done well, with rates of smoking and drinking alcohol among teenagers falling (fewer drinking but those who do so, drink excessively).[18] While introduced late compared with other countries, universal paid parental leave was a huge positive for Australia, both to enhance parenting and to make a statement about valuing children and those who care for them.[19]

Our fee-for-service model of medical care benefits the profession, focuses on disease care rather than prevention, and tends to increase the costs of care, much of which is not necessary and some actually not safe.[20] A clear example of this is the domination of pathology services nationally by a small number

of large corporations whose main aim is to make profits rather than serve their populations.[21] Fee for service also drives an oversupply of specialists in cities and a significant lack of access to necessary services outside the metropolitan area.[22,23] It is only recently that the medical profession has taken any interest in the health effects of climate change, except groups like the Doctors for the Environment[24] and the Climate and Health Alliance.[25] Now all — including the Australian Medical Association — are calling for reductions in fossil fuel mining and burning to protect the health of the population, particularly children.

Economic growth was the mantra guiding decisions before Covid and came at the cost of our children and young people's environments and communities. This hardly paints a picture of a society we want to 'snap back' to.

During Covid we saw Australia's new socialism: Have we the courage to change post-pandemic?

As the pandemic spread around the world, Australia saw a dramatic shift from our pre-Covid agendas, with our leaders prioritising our health over the economy. Governments not only listened to our scientists but acted on evidence, used data and valued science. As a consequence, we 'flattened the curve' and are now in a position where coronavirus is likely to be largely suppressed and future outbreaks manageable. The rapid embracing of science reversed almost 20 years of ignoring calls to avoid the health effects of climate change, to tackle obesity, prevent mental health problems and to reduce the Indigenous 'gap'. Scientists were no longer denigrated but praised. At the same time, our health professionals, teachers and childcare

workers were valued for their essential services. Similarly, Australians trust in our government and public services increased dramatically.[26]

Profit-seeking and partisan politics were cast aside, corporate lobbying ignored and human lives and societal wellbeing were paramount. This led to the most fundamental changes in our social architecture that we have witnessed in recent times, including free childcare, a fair basic income for those looking for work (i.e. doubling of Jobseeker) and retaining employees during the height of the pandemic (i.e. Jobkeeper). This socialist agenda was implemented almost overnight.

We also witnessed the expression of our civil societal values, with people mostly putting the health and wellbeing of others above all else 'by staying home to save lives.' For many families there was more time together and the pace of life slowed. For many, commute time became a thing of the past, and breakfast with the family a daily ritual. And an outcome that may help working mothers, dads being at home now realise how big (and enjoyable?) the task of child-rearing can be. During the months of the restrictions, there were walks in the park, people getting to know their neighbours, incredible acts of generosity and thoughtfulness, and children playing with chalk on the footpath or sending notes to older people in their street. These may not seem like much, but they are likely to be contributing to positive child development.

Despite these achievements highlighting the strength of compassion and kindness within communities, and what can be achieved when our leaders listen to science, the response also exposed the inequities of our society and weakness of our systems, as Solnic wrote in our opening quote. Many, particu-

larly the young and others in vulnerable jobs lost their incomes overnight. Lockdown certainly favoured people in high-skilled occupations with appropriate accommodation in which to work easily compared with those in unskilled occupations. Inequities also arose with the most marginalised and vulnerable children with online learning, where poor facilities or families for whom home-schooling was challenging, due to a variety of circumstances.

As lockdown restrictions ease, there are also worrying signs that the economy will be prioritised ahead of our health and wellbeing, and that the profits of a select few will determine our recovery path. For example, those hand-picked by the Prime Minister to join the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission have strong links to the fossil fuel industry, particularly gas.[27] Unsurprisingly, discussions to date have centred on an economic 'gas-fired recovery'. We need to ask the question of what is driving our recovery — Where is the consideration of the evidence of our desire for civil society values that will guide a more sustainable future for our youngest citizens and their children? If we attempt to return to 'business as usual' and prioritise growth in the economy and paying off debt, no matter the cost, it will be extremely detrimental to our capacity to reduce the impact of climate change on our health. There is also a danger that those wanting to support the fossil fuel industry will attempt to bring in changes to legislation or guidelines while we are preoccupied with recovering from the pandemic. This has happened in the United States with their Environmental Protection Agency relaxing all its emissions standards[28]; and the Victorian State Government has now

postponed the commencement of their Environmental Protection Act to 2021 to 'ease the burden on business, industry and Victorians as they address the impact of coronavirus'. Rio Tinto may have tried to blow up precious unique Juuken sites in the Pilbara under the Covid radar, but coming as it did just before the global rallies for Black Lives Matter, it possibly received more critical publicity internationally than they would have liked.

Given our reflections on the situation before Covid and the changes during Covid, it is clear that while much has been lost due to the pandemic, we might also consider what we might have gained. There seem to have been changes to people's opinions about what is important for them and the society in which they live. Before the pandemic, in spite of much evidence and science, it seemed impossible for us to change the powerful juggernaut of extreme and damaging capitalism. The pandemic has gifted us a way out, an opportunity to change paths and demand different ways of doing. One of Australia's leading investment groups, Macquarie Wealth, told investors 'conventional capitalism is dying, or at least mutating in to something closer to a version of communism'.[29]

Let us argue for a civil society recovery rather than an economic one. Surely if the recent bushfires and the pandemic have taught us anything, it is that we cannot continue pretending that our economy exists in a separate sphere, divorced from society and nature. Perhaps we may consider better measures than GDP to foster more equitable and sustainable future societies for our children?

Measurements of societal wellbeing — the courage to go beyond GDP and why it will influence the health impacts of climate change

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern startled participants at the Davos World Economic Forum in 2019 as she put forward the idea that government policies should be directed towards the future wellbeing of our societies and even be influenced by values such as kindness, fairness and compassion. What about GDP, which has been both the aim of most nations' governments and how they measure their success? Over the last two decades the OECD and the UN have been committed to measures other than GDP to evaluate the success of governments in enabling effective, equitable and sustainable societies. The UN's Millennium and now Sustainable Development Goals and the OECD's Better Life Index are leading a multi-nation movement to go 'Beyond GDP' to create sustainable and equitable wellbeing for nations.[30] At the last OECD Global Forum on Beyond GDP, over 100 nations reported progress on developing indices to measure wellbeing, equity and sustainability as well as economic success. The underlying principle here is that if these are national aspirations and can be measured well, then policies that influence these can be developed, implemented and evaluated. Hence, not only can we see the impact of these on GDP but also on total population measures of sustainable and equitable wellbeing.

What is wrong with GDP? GDP is defined as the total monetary or market value of all the goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period. It functions as a comprehensive score card of the country's economic health. Despite its limitations, GDP has become the

key tool to guide policy makers, investors and businesses in strategic financial decision making. For many, GDP is accepted as the absolute indicator of a nation's failure or success, way beyond its narrow economic focus. And the media and politicians love a single index to measure success, however flawed it might be.

From the 1950s, some economists and policy makers began to question the limitations of GDP as the singular measure of a society's success. GDP gives the same value to sales of goods that are harmful to our health and wellbeing such as alcohol, tobacco and guns, as to sales that are of benefit. GDP tells us nothing about our standard of living, the quality of our environment, our houses, our education system, our health or how our children and disabled are cared for. It does not take in to account informal economic activity such as unpaid work, which is significant in most countries. It focuses on consumption rather than production and misses out on valuable interactions between innovative cooperative activities. And while GDP rises it does not show the costs to the environment or to income inequalities that may result from such activities. Interestingly (given our recent devastating fires and now storms), after the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, GDP went up by $4 billion. Ross Gittins has just reminded us that GDP, 'that great god of Mammon' is 60 years old this year and 'it is no longer fit for purpose as economic growth does not measure human wellbeing.'[31]

Why do I (Fiona) as a public health doctor passionate about improving child, adolescent and First Nations' health and wellbeing think that measurements in addition to GDP would help Australia to tackle the health effects of climate change?

How good it would be to identify, for all subgroups in the population, the best pathways to improve health and wellbeing and to ensure that this information is used in high level federal and local policy making. If we had understood the power of prevention for most of the problems facing society today, including environmental degradation, climate change, water scarcity, suicide and poor mental health and many others, and used data to guide us, then our situation would be significantly better off. Such data were available but our governments have focused on GDP as a singular measure.

Moving to a system of measuring wellbeing is now being tested in many countries with OECD guidance and support. Most models are firmly anchored in a process of citizen engagement to renew democracy and to guide measurements. Asking our citizens what they value most and what priorities they want governments to focus on to deliver the kind of Australia they want in the future enhances their participation in the democratic process. The most successful models are those that are initiated by and embedded in governments, with countries as diverse as Italy, Canada, New Zealand, Wales, Bhutan, Ecuador, Costa Rica and many others showing that this approach is feasible. That is, that their Treasury decisions about government spending need to be guided (and then evaluated) by goals that are desired and valued by the people. The Prime Minister of New Zealand announced her first Wellbeing Budget in 2019, and this could be a model for us, but it will take that kind of political leadership to make it happen. We have had a process in Australia called the Australian National Development Index (ANDI) that aims to engage the public about the kind of future that they want for an equitable and

sustainable Australia. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals initiated by the UN in 2015 are an excellent start that are not just relevant to low-income countries but to all countries; their focus is really to reverse and control the juggernaut of unsustainable growth for short-term financial gain for the few.

In addition to overall measures, many indices of wellbeing provide the capability to drill down to the major societal factors that explain the trends, hence the usefulness for policy. It is unlikely that this will be attractive to the current federal government. In 2003, the Australian Treasury's mission was to 'improve the wellbeing of the Australian people', but by 2017 it had changed to 'be the preeminent economic advisor to government'. They also stopped funding the Australian Bureau of Statistics' project, Measuring Australia's Progress, which was admired internationally.

Seizing the day — not to snap back but to move towards equity and sustainability

The lack of national action on climate change — both its antecedents and impacts — in Australia over the last two decades is now proving to be a disaster for our health and wellbeing. The impact of severe weather events, of prolonged heatwaves and the increasingly disastrous bushfires on the health of our people has been enormous.[32] The health effects of fossil fuels are rarely considered when assessing the cost-effectiveness of using these for most of our energy production or when deciding on new coal mines or coal-burning power stations. In 2009, the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE) costed the health effects of coal in Australia to be $2b a year.[33] This was before the Morwell

coal fire disaster in Victoria. Air pollution is a major factor in health effects, with many respiratory illnesses caused and exacerbated by the burning of coal.[34] Successive Australian governments seem to have been paralysed to act on the clear evidence that coal burning is causing rising greenhouse gas emissions, which directly affect our risks of adverse weather events, bushfires and our health. This is of particular concern for children.[35]

We plead with our governments to learn from our excellent response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to realise that it gives us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shift to a more sustainable and equitable society. The UK Centre for Sustainability suggests there have been five lessons from the extraordinary situation of COVID-19 that demand fundamental large system change, all of which would help the aims we aspire to in this chapter. These five lessons are:

1. To 'seal' change pushed on us by Covid and not to revert to the pre-Covid suboptimal conditions. (The example given was the creation of temporary bicycle lanes all over London as people could not use cars or public transport; the plea is not to remove them!)

2. The inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19 need to be fixed as they will be good for all of us; it is not just an ethical or humane aim, but one that is economically and socially of huge benefit.

3. Do not believe in the false dichotomy between our health and our economy; they are intimately codependent — there will be no improved economy without good health in our populations.

4. Replace the word 'growth' with 'sustainable' — keeping on expanding and exploiting our environment, creating profits from all resources is just not a sustainable activity.

5. Do not connect the climate emergency to an environmental emergency but to a health emergency, as it then drives it home that it affects all of us.

We believe that there are some major changes to our pre-Covid society that would create a healthier society if we have the courage to implement them. We can certainly afford them; Richard Denniss (The Australia Institute) has written and spoken extensively on Australia's capacity and potential to pay, showing that we are one of the richest countries in the world (per capita). Our choices pre-Covid were a result of a lack of imagination by our politicians and their ignoring of the science of climate change and how to deal with other wicked challenges. Australia has shown how easy it has been to spend an extra $200 billion and could do the same to solve any problems. We urge Australian governments at all levels (federal, state and local) to base spending and investment on how well they improve wellbeing, equity and sustainability as many countries are doing.[36] These international models put human, social, natural and economic capital at the heart of budgeting.[37]

Denniss suggests three approaches to invest in areas to create the most jobs per dollar. First, these jobs are not in the building or mining sectors but in health, childcare, education and community services; second, pour money into the regions, again with those same jobs such as health and childcare; and third, fund jobs that give lasting benefits, ones that directly help our families and next generations, again those mentioned already fill that bill. Such investments would have a major

impact on youth and female employment prospects as well as help reduce inequity in areas outside as well as in major urban centres.[38]

Keeping universal free childcare would have a major impact on inequities in employment, increase women's employment (badly affected by the pandemic), enhance school readiness and educational inequalities (particularly in regional and marginalised populations), and add to tax revenues as more parents would be working. Ensuring that all people had a liveable income by simplifying Centrelink payments for unemployment, Jobseeker and Jobkeeper would have a major impact on poverty levels and dramatically reduce inequalities. This would enhance and work well with investing in the kinds of jobs suggested by Denniss above.

Specific suggestions in relation to being bold and courageous to reduce the health effects of climate change include a commitment to zero emissions by 2050; making decisions based on evidence, data and science; establishing a national centre for climate change and health; shifting away from fossil fuel mining and burning to the increasingly more cost-effective and healthy renewables of solar, wind and wave power where we could and should be world leaders; and implementing citizen engagement strategies. The latter would ensure that citizens' voices are heard, particularly those of young people, whose advocacy for climate change internationally has been huge. Surely they have a right to be heard, a chance to influence what our leaders prioritise for public funding, more than those with vested interests who are pushing for their own profits while destroying young peoples' futures? International successes with citizen engagement should be looked at such as

The Wales we Want[39], which is a most successful example of a working strategy.

The beautifully crafted requests from the Uluru Statement from the Heart are a specific example of citizen engagement for our First Nations populations across Australia. The requests are to have a First Nations voice enshrined in the constitution, with treaty negotiations and truth telling. Not only would these empower First Nations and enhance their health and wellbeing (as services run by them have been shown to be trusted and effective) but it may well enable us to partner with those who have extensive Indigenous wisdom in land management. This is not only in relation to burning practices but in a range of other activities that have shown to be advantageous in reducing harmful degradation. Having a voice may also mean that specific groups would have more power to oppose the building of mines on their traditional lands and reduce the numbers of polluting fossil fuel extractions.

Conclusions

While the COVID-19 pandemic has been a global disaster with much illness, death and economic pain, it also offers a huge opportunity to change the ways in which we live to ensure a more sustainable future for the planet. As the Black Lives Matter protests are also spreading around the globe, we look to black leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jnr in his Nobel acceptance speech. As long ago as 1964, he said: 'We have allowed the means by which we live to outdistance the ends for which we live. We have guided missiles and misguided men.' How prescient and so relevant that quote is for us today. We call

upon our misguided men to lead us in to a new world, like the one Martin Luther King would have wanted.

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